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ABSTRACT

Although helping students achieve academically is a major goal of public education, children come to school with a wide variety of needs and therefore should be treated as whole people rather than as detached receptacles for academic knowledge. A critical issue is the departure of adults from children's lives. What can schools do to promote a more caring environment which attempts to negate the negative impact of today's demography and simultaneously promote better academic achievement? Foremost is an acceptance that it really does take a whole village to rear a child. Fortunately, several innovative programs highlight the importance of children's overall development as being critical for their success in school. Two model programs are the School Development Program (involving educators, parents, community, and church), founded by James Comer more than 30 years ago, and the Talk to a Literacy Learner program developed by Trevor Cairney of the University of Western Sydney (Australia), which has been implemented in urbanized suburban schools in Sydney and has been successful in helping parents develop confidence and self esteem and interact positively with their children. Schools need to strike a balance of caring and substance because students thrive on both perspectives. (NKA)

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# Needed: Caring Schools

## A Brief Commentary

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The media are packed with stories about failing schools. Inner-city schools, in particular, are portrayed as bureaucracies that are unable to help minority students achieve successfully. With notable exceptions, such as James Traub's article in the January 16, 2000 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, most newspaper and broadcast journalists blame schools for poor test scores, and they rarely provide in-depth coverage of the causes of underachievement. Regrettably, the worth of schools is usually determined by standardized test results, which, at best, provide a rough index of academic achievement. (See Alfie Kohn's September 27, 2000 commentary concerning negative aspects of standardized testing.) Although helping students achieve academically is a major goal of public education, children come to school with a wide variety of needs and therefore should be treated as whole people rather than as detached receptacles for academic knowledge.

Consider the following demographic trends that impact substantially on children:

- About 50% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages end in divorce. Recent research findings suggest that divorce can have a devastating effect on children.
- Single parents, married parents, and remarried parents are joining the workforce in increasing numbers.
- A report of the Carnegie Corp. indicates that millions of teenagers become involved in drugs, alcohol, sex, and gangs because they have too much unsupervised time after school.
- A recent Gallup poll reports that 6% of adolescents have tried to commit suicide and that 15% have considered suicide because of family problems, depression, conflicts


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with friends, feelings of being worthless, and difficulties with male-female relationships.

- Surveys concerning television viewing suggest that children watch about 3-5 hours of television daily.

Compounding these demographic trends is the socially toxic environment in which children are being reared. According to James Garbarino, co-director of the Family Life Development Center and professor of Human Development at Cornell University, an increasing number of children are experiencing a social world that is poisonous to their overall development. Violence, poverty, and other economic pressures on families are causing alienation, nastiness, paranoia, and depression. These and other pollutants undermine families and communities as they impose threats on children and make them extremely vulnerable. Not surprisingly, a critical issue is the departure of adults from children's lives. In fact, some studies suggest a 50% decrease during the past three decades in the amount of time parents are involved with their children in constructive activities. Garbarino believes that the lack of cooperative, constructive activities involving adults and children exacerbates the effects of other negative influences in children's social environment.

What can schools do to promote a more caring environment, which attempts to negate the negative impact of today's demography and simultaneously to promote better academic achievement? Foremost is an acceptance that it really does take a whole village to rear a child. This maxim supports students' total development—social, emotional, spiritual, and experiential—which cannot be separated from academic success. Without

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such broad-based support, teaching will take place in a vacuous school setting and will not advance students' learning substantially.

Fortunately, a number educational studies and innovative programs highlight the importance of children's overall development as being critical for their success in school. For example, the School Development Program, founded by James Comer more than 30 years ago, involves educators, parents, community, and church. Their comprehensive mission is to carry out developmentally appropriate activities that help disadvantaged students improve their social, psycho-emotional, and academic growth. Through well-planned efforts, the key players become active participants in governance teams, including the School Planning and Management Team, the Parent Team, and the Student and Staff Support Team. The School Development Program recognizes the importance of community activity in sustaining meaningful educational reform of schools. Parents' involvement is strong as they are encouraged to genuinely support their children's education. The ultimate metaphoric aim of the program is to have children caught in a seamless web of caring people. In more than 700 schools nationwide and abroad, adults have demonstrated success in working cooperatively to improve children's social behavior and academic performance.

Another program involving caring people is Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL). This program was developed by Trevor Cairney of the University of Western Sydney in Australia and has been implemented in urbanized suburban schools located in western Sydney. As expected, families are exposed to the typical problems of a high-density urban setting, including high rates of unemployment, divorce, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, vandalism, and minimal involvement in the schools. TTALL has been effective in



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reaching out to parents and encouraging their participation in workshops that help them become active learners and respond effectively to their children's learning needs. Parents are also guided to become resources for their school and community. Specifically, they learn to help children other than their own and to share insights they gained from the workshops with other parents. Thus far, TTALL has been successful in helping parents develop confidence and self-esteem, learn new strategies and knowledge, interact effectively with their children, foster positive lifestyles of entire families, and share important insights with families, friends, and neighbors. As important, children's literacy learning, especially their reading and writing, has improved markedly. TTALL is another example of a strong, caring partnership that has enhanced children's learning environment in substantial ways.

Regrettably, innovative programs that help disadvantaged children and their families are sometimes criticized for highlighting global aspects of growth and development. Critics have argued that too much energy is directed toward holistic learning and self-esteem building and that not enough school time is focused on skill development and academic content. This narrow view, which is reflected in the national standards and testing initiatives, is gaining momentum with its resulting short-term successes and failures. Longitudinal success, however, requires more than prepping for tests; rather it is based on emotional considerations and hard work that foster collaboration, self-discipline, intrinsic motivation, and commitment to developing the lifetime love of learning. Interestingly, efforts to promote this broad-based perspective not only can be balanced with strong academic curricula, but also can lead to better academic outcomes.

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Critics have also argued that innovative programs are costly and increase school taxes. These critics fail to realize that money constructively spent today can reduce expenses for future remedial services, can eliminate psychological frustration related to failure, and can decrease the number of school dropouts. This cost-effective approach also increases the chances that high school graduates will be successful problem-solvers who continue their education and become productive members of society. These outcomes are predicated on educators judiciously selecting innovative programs that are supported by research and that represent a good fit with local needs.

No one has yet developed a perfect scheme for resolving the underachievement issue in American schools. Responding to students' strengths and needs in "big-picture" ways is a step in the right direction. Schools need to strike a balance of caring and substance because students thrive on both perspectives.

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